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## **ACSP Distinguished Educator, 2000:**

### **Melvin M. Webber**

Michael B. Teitz and Karen S. Christensen

As a theorist, teacher, researcher, editor and institution builder in the fields of city planning and transportation, Melvin Webber (always known as Mel) was far ahead of his time, playing a major role in the development of these fields, both academically and professionally, over a 50 year span. A product of the University of Texas institutional economics school of thought, Mel's contributions to urban planning theory centered on two sets of ideas that he developed beginning in the early 1960s. Reflecting on the complexity of urban development in an age of rapidly growing communications and mobility, he challenged the conceptual foundations of the field, postulating that urban planners and transportation analysts should focus less on the notion of place and more on the linkages and connections, both physical and informational, that bound together what he called "nonplace realms." Seeing the city as, in effect, a giant switchboard, he anticipated by decades currently fashionable views of the network society. In the light of new forms of communication and the prevalence of the automobile, he argued that concentrated, denser urban forms were not necessarily more desirable than more dispersed settlements.

These ideas were influential in the U.K. in the 1960s, especially in the design of the new town of Milton Keynes. Unlike other British "New Towns," Milton Keynes embraced the automobile, leading to fierce debates among planners and urban designers. "[W]here hierarchy and determinacy were out, freedom of action was the governing principle, and automobility would be the key... MK (as it soon became known) became the town that many planners loved to hate. But to this day its citizens, significantly, hail the quality of life there" (Hall, 2006-2007). These issues resonate today in debates over urban sprawl and climate change. In his own life, Melvin Webber exemplified membership in his memorably described "community without propinquity," building new networks of scholars, researchers, and professionals across disciplinary boundaries, yet he remained firmly rooted in Berkeley.

Mel Webber's second major theoretical insight, which places him, with Horst Rittel, among the greatest planning thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, defined a new class of "wicked problems" in public policy, which by their very nature defied the possibility of solution by conventional rational approaches, as the apparent solution might expose yet another complex problem. This set of

insights prompted substantial academic work, being cited 13588 times as of this writing. Both the “non-place urban realm” and “wicked problems” continue to stimulate debate and exercise power.

Another significant contribution, perhaps not as widely acclaimed, is the concept of permissive planning (Webber, 1974). This is the antithesis of the widely assumed planning characteristic of constraining behavior, either public or individual, to conform to the planning vision. Permissive planning aims to expand choice.

Mel Webber was also an extraordinary institution builder. From the time of his initial appointment in 1956 to the recently established Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, he was a principal force and intellect that elevated the department to its current status among the leading programs in the United States and the world. Webber recognized that professional fields, such as planning and transportation, required strong intellectual foundations and research capabilities in order to survive. By identifying leading sociologists, economists and regional science scholars and bringing them to the University, he transformed Berkeley’s program into a multidisciplinary enterprise that ranged from physical planning to social policy, initiating a Ph.D. program, and insisting on rigorous, grounded research. At the same time, he taught planning theory and transportation planning to generations of master’s and doctoral students. Beyond the Department of City and Regional Planning, Webber played an important part in the University, especially in the Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate, on whose committees he served for many years. In 1990, he was awarded the Berkeley Citation for his outstanding service to the University. The nomination for this prestigious award described Prof. Webber as the “father of modern academic urban planning” and a visionary whose research and teaching wielded “national and international influence” (Maclay, 2006).

In 1970, Mel Webber became director of the Institute of Urban and Regional Development (IURD), which he developed into one of the leading research organizations in his field. His ability to extract support from Washington using his network of telephone connections was legendary. As a young professional, freshly out of graduate school, he had worked on the metropolitan plan that was an integral part of the feasibility studies for the construction of the Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART), the first heavy rail transit system to be built in the U.S. in decades. At IURD, reflecting on the effectiveness of that decision, he initiated the first large scale and systematic study of BART’s impact on travel behavior and land use. The study was new both in its policy focus and methodology, generating methods that are still employed for such studies. Daniel McFadden, a UC Berkeley economics professor who won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2000 for his work on how consumers make decisions, said Webber was the key person at UC Berkeley

who in 1971 recognized the merit of McFadden's research on choice behavior and his proposal to use BART to test methods for predicting demand for new transportation methods. "I would say that he was my mentor, and one of the people on whose shoulders I stood to receive the recognition that I have." (Maclay 2006)

However, the study's conclusions—that BART fell far short of expectations in ridership, that its costs were high, that its route pattern was too rigid, and land use impacts minimal—led to major debates and influenced the funding of heavy rail systems in subsequent years. Instead of these, Webber argued for a more cost-effective and flexible mix of transportation modes, including automobiles and express buses, and pricing strategies to reduce infrastructure investment.

Subsequently, Mel Webber secured federal government funding for the University of California Transportation Center (UCTC), which he directed from 1988 until 1996, building it into a leading center for research on transportation policy. He also engaged in consultation and research for governments and agencies, such as the World Bank, in many countries across five continents. After his retirement, he continued to play a significant role in shaping research and securing funding for new work in the center, as well as contributing to the successful development of the UC Berkeley Retirement Center, where his unrivaled network enabled him to develop lecture series.

Mel Webber's influence on scholarship and the planning profession also flowed through his role as editor and critic. In his tenure as editor of the field's leading journal, then called the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, he elevated rigorous scholarship in conjunction with professional and policy relevance. He was a superlative editor, meticulous, demanding, and encouraging. Late in his career, noting that policy research was too often impenetrable to the average person, he founded and edited the journal *Access*, the official magazine of the University of California Transportation Center, which sought to make complex analyses of policy issues comprehensible.

Authors' note: The Profile builds on a memorial Michael Teitz wrote shortly after Webber died. The authors would like to thank Hilda Blanco, Elizabeth Deakin and Karen Frick for their assistance. Interested readers are encouraged to read the Special Issue of *Access* 2006 – 07 on Mel Webber.

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## Note

Mel Webber was born in Hartford, Connecticut, on May 6, 1920. He spent his high school years there, but moved to the University of Texas, Austin, for his undergraduate studies, gaining a B.A. in 1947 and an M.A. 1948 in economics and sociology. Subsequently, he came to the University of California, Berkeley, intending to pursue a Ph.D. However, there he encountered T. J. Kent, who had founded the Department of City and Regional Planning in 1948. Melvin Webber entered the program and graduated with an M.C.P. degree in 1952. Following four years in professional practice, he returned to teach in the program from 1956 until his retirement in 1990.

## Author biographies

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